

THE ROLE OF WOMEN ON DUTCH FARMS

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Abstract

In this paper an analysis is made of the contribution of women to labour input and management on Dutch farms. We used a written survey among the participants of the Dutch Farm Accountancy Data Network (FADN), in-depth interviews and a group discussion with farm women.

Over half of the women on Dutch farms spend more than ten hours per week on agricultural activities on the farm. More than 40% of women on Dutch farms have paid work off farm. The majority of the respondents' farms is legally organized as a partnership. It appears that women are more often involved in strategic decision making than in operational decision making. On average, farm women are neither unsatisfied nor satisfied with the financial situation on the farm. Problems often faced by women on Dutch farms refer to the return on agricultural activities, the potential for scale enlargement, the financing of the succession of the farm, and legal regulations, subsidies and permits around the farm business. For more than two-thirds of the women, the continuation of the family farm by the next generation is no main objective.

Keywords: farm women; Dutch farms; off farm work; decision making; farm succession.

1. Introduction

The Netherlands is a densely populated country, in which the population is spread throughout the country. As a result, urban and rural areas are closely connected to each other and Dutch farmers face the challenge that citizens nearby are directly confronted with the external effects - be they positive or negative - of farming activities, provoking societal debate on agricultural practices. Another result of the high population density is that agricultural area is scarce, which is reflected in high levels of land productivity and a relative large share of intensive livestock farming and horticulture under glass. Out of the total of over 65,000 farms in the Netherlands in 2014, about 8% were intensive livestock farms, 15% horticultural farms, 25% dairy farms, 28% other grazing livestock farms and 18% arable farms (LEI, 2014a). The average farm size in 2010 was about 26 hectares against 14 hectares in the EU27 (EC, 2013). The agricultural sector employs about 2% of total employment in the Netherlands against 5% in the EU27 (EC, 2013). The agricultural labour force in 2014 amounts to about 190,000 persons, of which nearly one third is female (LEI, 2014b). Over 70% of the agricultural labour force consists of family labour. The large majority of Dutch farms - about 87% - was in 2013 organized as family farm (Berkhout et al., 2014). This share is in the same magnitude as the EU average.

According to the FAO (2013), family farming is a means of organizing agricultural production which is managed and operated by a family and predominantly reliant on family labour, including both women's and men's. Among a wide variety in size and product orientation, family farms have a number of common characteristics (Hill, 1993; Backus et al., 2009; Boerderij, 2013; Boerderij Vandaag, 2014). First, due to the family kinship the family farm members both have a business and a personal relationship with each other. Second, decisions on farm management are made at the kitchen table as the family provides both the operator(s) and the majority of supplied capital. Third, the farm business is run

in such a way that it can be continued by the next generation. Because of the close links between work and private life in a family farm, the business role, the capital supply role and the family role of the family members become confused, which can lead to communication problems and strong emotions, especially around the succession of the farm.

Considering that the large majority of Dutch farms is organized as family farms, it could be assumed that women are present on most Dutch farms.

Nevertheless, the role of women on Dutch farms has hardly been studied. Based on a survey of over 400 women on farms in the Netherlands at the beginning of the 1980s, Loeffen (1984) found that the labour input of women was indispensable for the continuity of the farm. However, women hardly had a say in business decisions and were more like assisting wives than co-businesswomen. Societal change since the 1980s, such as higher education levels, higher female labour participation rates and the increase in pluriactivity on Dutch farms, also affected the role of women on farms. Bock (2004) perceived that farm women in the Netherlands gradually started with some small-scale new activities on or outside the farm in such a way that it did not hamper the other family members and that the existing labour division between the farmer and his wife remained unaffected. During the last decade, hardly any quantitative studies on the labour input of women on Dutch farms and their role in farm management have been conducted.

Objective of this paper

Given the lack of recent insights into the role of women on Dutch farms, in this paper an analysis is made of the contribution of women to labour input and management on Dutch farms. Although our study uses a different approach relative to the study of women on Dutch farms by Loeffen (1984), it allows for some general comparisons between the current situation with that in the 1980s.

Plan of this paper

The outline of this paper is as follows. In Section 2, we discuss the methodological approach of this paper. In Section 3, we present the main results. Section 4 offers some concluding remarks.

2. Methodological approach

For obtaining insight into the contribution of women to labour input and management on Dutch farms we used a written survey, interviews and a group discussion. A written survey was sent in summer 2014 by email to the participants of the Dutch Farm Accountancy Data Network (FADN). The Dutch FADN sample includes about 1,500 commercial agricultural and horticultural farms. These farms are responsible for 99% of total national production capacity, measured in Standard Output. In the email we asked whether the survey could be completed by the woman on the farm.

From the sample of 1,233 farms, 292 responded to our survey. Since about one third of the returned surveys were not usable, because they were incomplete or had been completed by men, we based our analysis on 195 surveys. These were all completed by women, who are the partner of the farmer and/or business head. Dutch farms are often run by more than one business head.

Four respondents, who had indicated in the survey that they could be consulted for further information, were selected for an in-depth interview in order to collect qualitative information about the 'how' and 'what' backgrounds of certain choices within the farm family. The draft results of the analysis have been presented and discussed with a group of 11 farmers' wives, who visited our institute.

Survey questions

The survey asked 77 closed questions. Based on the literature on family businesses and the study of Loeffen (1984) the questions were divided into the following ten themes:

1. General information about the respondent
2. Level of knowledge of family members on the farm
3. Activities of the woman and her partner
4. Education and work of children over 12 years
5. Household
6. Farm takeover
7. Involvement in decision making processes
8. Satisfaction with the farm
9. Involvement in the family farm
10. Problems on the farm.

Typology of farm women according to their activities on and off farm

The contribution of women to labour input and management on farms could be affected by the amount of their labour input on the farm and by having paid work off farm. In order to explore differences among farm women according to the amount of labour spent on and off farm, we designed a typology of farm women according to their activities with four types (Table 1). This typology is used in analysing the answers to the survey.

Table 1 Typology of farm women according to their activities on and off farm (%) (N=195)

		% in sample
Limited activities on farm	Woman has no paid work off farm and spends less than 10 hours per week on agricultural or non-agricultural labour on farm	13
Active on farm	Woman has no paid work off farm and spends more than 10 hours per week on agricultural or non-agricultural labour on farm	43
Combiners	Woman has paid work off farm and spends more than 10 hours per week on agricultural or non-agricultural labour on farm	17
Active off farm	Woman has paid work off farm and spends less than 10 hours per week on agricultural or non-agricultural labour on farm	27
Total		100

3. Results

The respondents originate from different farm types (Table 2). Compared to the whole FADN population, the response reflects an underrepresentation of horticultural farms. This could be due to the focus of this study on women and the questions related to the farm family. Horticultural farms use relatively more non-family labour than other farm types and are more often organized as legal entities such as private companies with a larger distance between the company and the farm family.

Over 70% of the respondents fall in the age group of 40 to 59 years; 13% are younger than 40 years and 10% are 60 years or older. The average age is 49 years. If we compare this age distribution with that of all farm holders in the Netherlands, then it appears that our respondents are on average somewhat younger (EC, 2013).

Table 2 Distribution of women and nature of their work according to farm type (%) (N=195)

Farm type	Limited activities on farm	Active on farm	Combiners	Active off farm	Total
Arable farming	12	12	12	12	12
Dairy	12	47	18	23	31
Intensive livestock	16	45	23	16	16
Horticulture under glass	15	50	12	23	13
Horticulture in the open air	13	44	19	25	8
Other	5	45	27	23	11
Unknown	6	44	13	38	8
Total	13	43	17	27	100

Over 40% of women have paid work off farm

More than half of the women have no paid work off farm (Table 1 and Table 2). Most of these women belong to the group of active women on farm and spend more than 10 hours per week on agricultural activities. About one sixth of women belong to the group of combiners, who have both work off farm and spend more than 10 hours per week performing agricultural activities. Finally, more than a quarter of the women work off farm and are involved in agricultural work less than 10 hours per week. This pattern occurs on most farm types apart from arable farms. On these farms, both the share of less active women and that of women active off farm is well above the average. The relatively high share of less active women on arable farms could be because a number of these women are a bit older; the relatively high share of women active off farm could be related to activities on arable farms not requiring labour deployment all day and all year as is the case on other farm types. In addition, the services of contractors are often used on arable farms. A last explanation could be related to the type of activities on arable farms, in which often tractor work is involved. One of the interviewees remarked that a common belief held in the Netherlands is ‘that as a woman you do simply not sit on a tractor’.

The share of 44% of respondents with paid work off farm (Table 2) is considerably higher than in the 1980s, when only 5% of the Dutch women on farms worked off farm (Loeffen, 1984). To marry a farmer at that time implied that ‘you married the farm’ as well. Nowadays, scale enlargement, farm specialization and ICT offer women space to work outside the farm (Van der Meulen et al., 2014). The interviewees emphasized that the decision to work off farm depends on a clear and well-coordinated distribution of agricultural, household and child care tasks between the woman and her partner, which reveals if and how much time is available for the woman to spend on off farm work.

Labour participation of agricultural women compared to non-agricultural women

On average, the labour participation rate of all women in the Netherlands amounted to almost 60% in 2013 (CBS StatLine). For determining the labour participation rate of the agricultural women, it has to be decided if this is derived from the share of women with paid work off farm (44%) or the share of women performing agricultural activities on farm (79%). In the first case, the labour participation rate of women

on surveyed farms is below the average female employment in the Netherlands; in the second case above it.

The more agricultural work done by women, the more partnerships

The majority of the respondents' farms (57%) is legally organized as a partnership (Table 3). In particular, farms where women spend 10 hours or more per week on agricultural activities tend to be organized as a partnership. This legal type is attractive from a fiscal point of view as it enables remuneration of the work of the wife and other family members and accumulation of capital. This is a drastic change compared to the 1980s, when this legal form was hardly used (Loeffen, 1984). More than a quarter of women come from farms that are organized as a sole proprietorship. In the 1980s, this was still more than 80%. This legal form is currently especially common on farms on which women are active off farm.

Table 3 Distribution of farms according to legal type (%) (N=179)

Legal type	Limited activities of women	Women active on farm	Combiners	Women active off farm	Total
Private Company	4	13	3	4	8
Partnership	52	65	63	42	57
Sole proprietorship	36	14	22	48	27
Unknown	8	8	13	7	8
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Over two thirds of women involved in strategic decision making on farms

In the survey we distinguish two types of decision making on farms: operational decisions on which activities will be performed today and strategic business decisions on items such as investments, purchase of land or farm succession. It appears that women are more often involved in strategic decision making (71%) than in operational decision making (37%) (Table 4). Among the four types of women, differences in the involvement in decision making can be perceived: women active on farm and combiners show a higher degree of involvement in decision making than women less active on farm or working off farm. Compared to the situation in the 1980s, when about 40-50% of the farm women participated in strategic decision making (Loeffen, 1984), the involvement of women has increased. The involvement of women who work off farm in the decision making on farm implies that women's experiences from outside the farm can be included in the decision making on farm. This makes decision making on farms less isolated from societal processes.

Table 4 Involvement of women in operational and strategic business decision making (%) (N=195)

	Operational decision making		Total
	Not or less involved	Highly or fully involved	
Limited activities on farm	76	24	100
Active on farm	44	56	100
Combiners	60	40	100
Active off farm	90	10	100
Total	63	37	100
	Strategic decision making		Total
	Not or less involved	Highly or fully involved	
Limited activities on farm	33	67	100
Active on farm	16	84	100
Combiners	9	91	100
Active off farm	60	40	100
Total	29	71	100

Satisfaction with financial results and bottlenecks

In the survey, women could assess the financial results of the farm, the financial perspectives of the farm and total family farm income with scores on a scale of (1) very unsatisfied to (5) very satisfied. On average women gave a score of 3.5, meaning that women are neither unsatisfied nor satisfied with the financial situation on the farm.

To gain insight into what problems women experience, we asked them to rate a list of problems on a scale of (1) no bottleneck to (5) a major bottleneck. Factors that are most often mentioned as a bottleneck concern the return on agricultural activities (70% of women), the potential for scale enlargement (70%), the financing of the succession of the farm (67%), and legal regulations, subsidies and permits around the farm business (64%). Business and personal relationships between family members who have to work together and the required knowledge and skills within the company are less often perceived as a problem.

Farm succession for majority of women no main objective

For over two thirds of the respondents, the continuation of the family farm by the next generation is no main objective (Table 5). The proportion of women who indicate that continuing the farm by the next generation is important for them is somewhat higher among women active on farm and combiners compared to women less active on farm and women active off farm. The interviewees pointed out that a few decades ago it was much more taken for granted that one of the children would take over the farm. Nowadays this is no longer the case because children have more opportunities outside the agricultural sector and because farm takeover implies a large financial burden for the successor and a big responsibility. So the 'profession of farmer' must be really appealing to the successor before he or she decides to take over the farm.

Table 5 Proportion of respondents indicating to agree with the statement that farm succession is an important objective of the farm family(%) (N=195)

Legal type	Limited activities of women	Women active on farm	Combiners	Women active off farm	Total
A successful farm succession by the next generation is an important goal for the family	30	36	36	21	31

4. Concluding remarks

In this paper we have analysed the role of women on Dutch farms. In particular, we explored the contribution of women to labour input and to management and compared the current situation with that in the 1980s.

Over 40% of women have paid work off farm

Over half of the women on Dutch farms spend more than ten hours on agricultural activities on the farm. Only a small group of these women also has paid work off farm. It appears that as women are less active on farm, they more often tend to have paid work off farm. In total, over 40% of women on Dutch farms have paid work off farm. This is significantly more than in the 1980s, when only 5% of women on Dutch farms had paid work off farm. It appears that the decision to work off farm depends on a clear and

well-coordinated distribution of agricultural, household and child care tasks between the woman and her partner.

The more agricultural work done by women, the more partnerships

The majority of the respondents' farms (57%) is legally organized as a partnership. It appears that the more hours spend by women on agricultural activities, the more often farms tend to be organized as a partnership. This legal type is attractive from a fiscal point of view as it enables to remunerate the work of the wife and other family members and to accumulate capital. This is a drastic change compared to the 1980s, when this legal form was hardly used.

Decision making, financial situation and problems faced

It appears that women are more often involved in strategic decision making (71%) than in operational decision making (37%). Women who spend more hours on agricultural activities tend to be more involved in decision making on farm than women who are less active on farm. On average, farm women are neither unsatisfied nor satisfied with the financial situation on farm. Problems often faced by women on Dutch farms concern the return on agricultural activities, the potential for scale enlargement, the financing of the succession of the farm, and legal regulations, subsidies and permits around the farm business.

Farm takeover by children no longer a matter of course

While it used to be much more taken for granted in the Netherlands that one of the children would take over the farm, our analysis showed that nowadays that is no longer the case. Women pointed out that children have more opportunities outside the agricultural sector and farm takeover implies a large financial burden for the successor and a big responsibility. So the successor should possess the necessary capacities and must be really driven to become a farmer.

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